

Homily: 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B) 2021

Reflecting on today's Gospel made me think of the composer Ludwig van Beethoven, whose music I very much enjoy. Beethoven was almost completely deaf for the last thirteen years of his life, and before that had been losing his hearing for several years. Surprisingly, perhaps, he continued to compose after he'd lost his hearing, and some of his greatest and most joyful works date from this time. As a skilled musician and gifted composer, he would have been able to hear in his mind the sound his music made, but it's strange to think that he never physically heard so much of what he had written. Of course, he could only carry on composing because earlier in life he had been given the gift of hearing: he had learnt to listen to music, to understand its structures and forms, to appreciate the sounds made by different instruments. Without this earlier experience, he would never have been able to compose. In the same way, someone who loses their hearing later in life will still be able to speak, but someone who has never had the gift of hearing will not be able to clearly form words. Presumably the man in today's Gospel, who cannot hear and can make sounds but not words, has never been able to hear: that is why he cannot speak.

We must be able to hear in order to learn to speak. This is true not only in a general sense, but also for each particular message. If we have never heard a certain truth, we cannot speak it. To be able to announce something, we must first receive it by listening and understanding. This is true in our spiritual lives. What are we called to hear and to say? The most obvious answer is: the Gospel. We are called to hear the message of hope and salvation which is the Good News of Jesus Christ, and then to share that message with others. This is not an optional extra for Christians: every one of us is called to share our faith. But there is another, more particular sense in which we are called to hear and speak. In his letter to the Romans, St Paul says that we are to cry out to God as 'Abba' – an Aramaic word meaning 'Dad'. But to cry out to God in this way, to *speak* to Him like this, we must first *hear* His invitation to enter into relationship with Him. If we have not heard His message of love and His call to know Him as our loving Father, we cannot then speak to Him in this familiar and loving way.

There are some unusual features in today's miracle, not least the fact that Jesus takes the man aside before curing him. Many of the Lord's miracles are worked in front of a crowd, but this one takes place in private, with just Jesus and the man and perhaps a small group of disciples. Perhaps Jesus is concerned that the man, who has never yet heard a human voice, might be overawed or alarmed by hearing the voices of a crowd, who would undoubtedly break into discussion as soon as they realised a miracle had occurred. Or perhaps He wants the man to focus only on Him, so He takes him aside to avoid distractions. The man is healed in a very visual and very physical way: Jesus looks up to heaven and sighs – an action which would have been visible to the deaf man; He places His fingers in the man's ears and touches His tongue with spittle. These visible and tangible actions form almost a sort of sign language with which Jesus communicates with the man who cannot hear. It's also very sacramental: even today, the Lord continues to offer His grace through physical means – the visible, tangible signs of water, oil, bread and wine in the sacraments. Jesus understands the needs of the man, how to communicate with him;

and He understands our needs too: He finds ways of communicating with us, sometimes beyond words.

God wants us to be able to hear. Sometimes He may take us aside from the crowd, to open our ears away from the distractions of day-to-day life. He may use the words of Scripture, the physical materials of the sacraments, the teaching of the Church, the help or guidance of another person. He wants us to hear Him. He wants us to hear a message of love, an invitation to relationship, so we can come to Him in prayer and recognise Him truly as our loving Father. And He wants us to hear the Gospel, His message of salvation and hope, which we can speak to others who do not yet know Him. Perhaps one day, through us, their ears will be opened too.

Fr Andrew

